

Soldiering in Unfamiliar Places: The Dutch Approach

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ARMIES ARE learning organizations. They try to learn as much as possible from previous wars and from armed conflicts fought by others. Armies try to keep up to date in skills, technology, and organization. Within certain limitations, they try to achieve the highest possible state of military effectiveness and capability while preparing for different types of operations, from multitheater, joint campaigns to small-scale operations other than war. The overall aim of their efforts is always the same: to conduct military operations in the field that will achieve planned strategic objectives and create the desired postconflict situation.

In this respect, Dutch Armed Forces are no different from U.S. Armed Forces. We have learned lessons from our experiences in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Since the end of the Cold War, the tasks facing our military have changed. Postconflict operations demand new skills. Whereas the warrior spirit is excellent for soldiers in dealing with combat circumstances, peacekeeping operations often require a different mental outlook. Training soldiers for peacekeeping missions must include some form of instruction for dealing with a nonhostile local population. In anticipation of such missions, we have learned that culture training can be of great value.

Signs of Progress

Some Dutch Army officers have followed with great interest the recent developments in the United States on the need to incorporate a higher level of cultural knowledge in pre-deployment training. In July 2004, U.S. Army Major General Robert Scales' testimony before the U.S. House Armed Services Committee drew public attention to this topic. He emphatically stated that one of the lessons identified from the war in Iraq was that conducting culture-centric warfare required a new form of cultural awareness within the U.S. Army.¹

In 2005, *Military Review* and other journals carried the debate still further.² Apart from contributions on paper, there have been practical steps forward as well. Reforms in training programs were introduced at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, Louisiana, and at the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Similar developments occurred elsewhere. In May 2005 the U.S. Marine Corps set up a Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning at Quantico, Virginia. Its mission is to "develop, resource, execute, and evaluate training and education concepts, policies, plans, and programs to ensure Marines are prepared to meet the challenges of present and future operational environments."³

The Intelligence community has also become aware of the need to incorporate cultural intelligence into joint intelligence doctrine.⁴ Understanding cultural factors, how and why other groups act, and how they think, can only be assured if cultural training is part of intelligence education. In short, the U.S. military is progressing, and training in cultural awareness is gaining ground within the U.S. defence organization. Still, it remains uncertain to what extent cultural awareness has been incorporated into pre-deployment training.

Armies are learning organizations indeed. Armies are also bureaucratic institutions, with an innate resistance to change. They are strongly attached to traditions; to familiar, embedded practices; and to standard operational procedures that have withstood the test of time. Military conservatism can be a powerful barrier to reforms. So perhaps it can be beneficial to learn how the Dutch Army has dealt with this same issue.

Background

In the Netherlands, cultural training is a standard part of the curriculum for every unit and member of the Armed Forces assigned to a specific mission abroad.

The Chief of the Defence Staff (renamed the Commander of the Armed Forces Staff) Instruction Number A-700 specifies three requirements in the field of cultural awareness:

- Basic knowledge of the cultural heritage and history of the mission area.
- Basic knowledge of local customs, mentality, and do's and don'ts.
- Basic knowledge and skills needed to communicate with all parties concerned.⁵

Knowledge of cultural heritage and history. The first requirement reflects the legal origins of culture training. After the large-scale destruction of European heritage during World War II, the Netherlands actively promoted the legal protection of cultural heritage in times of war. In 1954, a diplomatic conference adopted the "Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict" and an additional protocol.⁶ A second protocol was adopted in 1999.⁷ Legal regulations included in this international treaty obliged all contracting parties (114 to date) to respect cultural property by refraining from military use of such property or by refraining from directing any act of hostility or reprisal against it.

By 1953, the Dutch Army had already set up a small military unit called the Bureau for Cultural Heritage within the territorial home defense organization. In times of war the unit was to organize the transport and safekeeping of the nation's most valuable objects and buildings of cultural heritage and to prevent the military use of historic monuments and sites by Army commanders. The Bureau, which existed throughout the Cold War, maintained a list of reserve officers, held regular meetings with civilian officials and cultural institutions, and organized training programs to prepare emergency evacuations and transports.

The end of the Cold War put an end to these activities. Preparing for a war on home territory no longer seemed necessary. New military tasks became more prominent, and now, peace-support operations are the Dutch Army's core business. Organization, arms and equipment, and basic training are still based on maintaining the capability of fighting a large-scale armed conflict, but the focus of attention has shifted to a different kind of operation.

The link between peacekeeping and culture was not obvious from the start. Legal arguments helped to clarify the link. Legal experts argued that



Dutch ISAF soldier greeting Afghan woman in Kabul, 2002.

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International Humanitarian Law applied to peace-support operations during armed conflicts within sovereign states; thus, the obligations outlined in the Treaty of The Hague had to be incorporated into the training program for soldiers preparing for the U.N. Protection Force (UNPROFOR) mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In the 1992-1995 Bosnian war, the destruction of cultural heritage was intimately linked to ethnic cleansing. Members of warring parties deliberately targeted religious buildings, cemeteries, libraries, museums, and archives in an effort to erase the most valuable cultural property of other population groups or to destroy all evidence of their previous presence in a certain area. During our operations, we had to learn to identify what was left of the cultural heritage in Bosnia and know how to respect cultural property. The Army turned to the Bureau for Cultural Heritage for instructors for our peace-support training program, and cultural information became part of the curriculum.

Knowledge of local customs. Most Dutch soldiers appreciated the information presented during the lessons on cultural heritage in Bosnia, but when they arrived in-theater they needed something more. In certain ways Bosnian culture (whether Serbian, Croatian, or Bosniac) differed somewhat in religious beliefs, social customs, style of communication and mental outlook. Soldiers clearly needed more information on these matters. Army command supported a redefinition of culture, too.

After 1995, circumstances in-theater changed. UNPROFOR first became the Implementation



Civilian and military staff of the Section Cultural Affairs and Information on a field visit to Bosnia-Herzegovina, 2004.

Force (IFOR) and then the Stabilization Force (SFOR), whose main military task was to contribute to the stabilization of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The new situation required closer relationships with local communities. Yet, reports from Bosnia indicated that the effectiveness of the military mission was sometimes hampered by soldiers' less-than-sensitive behavior toward members of local communities. Some of our troops also found it difficult to understand the postwar and postcommunist circumstances in which the local population was living. We needed a different kind of information to increase situational awareness.

Communication skills. All in all, military requirements called for a change in approach, away from the art-historical toward the anthropological. We needed a different field of expertise, so we recruited area specialists who had knowledge of social and historical circumstances. Some historians and regional experts joined the Bureau as permanent civilian staff members. In 1999, the Bureau became the Section [of] Cultural Affairs and Information to reflect the unit's new task.

Peacekeeping Training

All of our serving troops and new recruits are aware that the Dutch Army is primarily involved

in such postconflict tasks as peacekeeping, peace-enforcement, stability, and security assistance operations. Although basic military training and formation exercises at all levels focus on warfighting skills and capabilities, the reality of deployment is quite different. From Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia to Kampuchea, Eritrea, Afghanistan, and Iraq, our operations have dealt with peacekeeping in one way or another. Whereas our fighting capability is still based on the armor-heavy mechanized brigade or air assault brigade, most battle groups used in peace-support operations consist of an infantry battalion and various attached support units. Each new mission requires a different task force, and each task force is composed of elements from the regular military organization. The basic military structure of the Dutch Army remains intact.

The same mix of basics and mission-specific requirements is found in our training. The Dutch military training effort is essentially a three-block program that begins with individual basic skills and drills aimed at surviving battlefield circumstances and then continues with section, platoon, company, battalion, and brigade exercises that build up unit or formation wartime effectiveness and capabilities.

Each unit enters a pre-deployment program on being assigned to a peacekeeping mission. The



Classroom instruction at the "Harskamp" military training facility, 1999.

first phase of this program consists of making all necessary preparations under the unit commander's supervision to achieve the highest state of readiness for deployment. Getting the unit to full strength, testing all gear and equipment, conducting target practice, and honing skills and drills are all part of the early preparation stage. The second phase consists of a so-called mission-directed instruction week (for units) or mission-directed education (for individual assignments, mostly staff officers) of 2 weeks.

Both phases include classroom courses that deal with the mission's particular circumstances. Subjects include terrain, weather, climate; stress and trauma; dealing with the media; coping with hostage situations; hygiene and local diseases; legal aspects of deployment; rules of engagement; counterintelligence and security; mine and improvised explosive-device awareness; utilizing interpreters; communications and transmission drills; current affairs; working with international and nongovernmental organizations; and cultural information.

The third block of the pre-deployment program is a 10- to 14-day dress rehearsal exercise conducted a few weeks before departure. The entire mission task force, usually an infantry battalion with additional support (engineers, artillery, transport and logistics, communications, medical facilities, military police, intelligence, and extra staff officers) comes together for training under mission-like circumstances. Instructors with experience in the mission area write realistic exercise scenarios and act as supervisors.

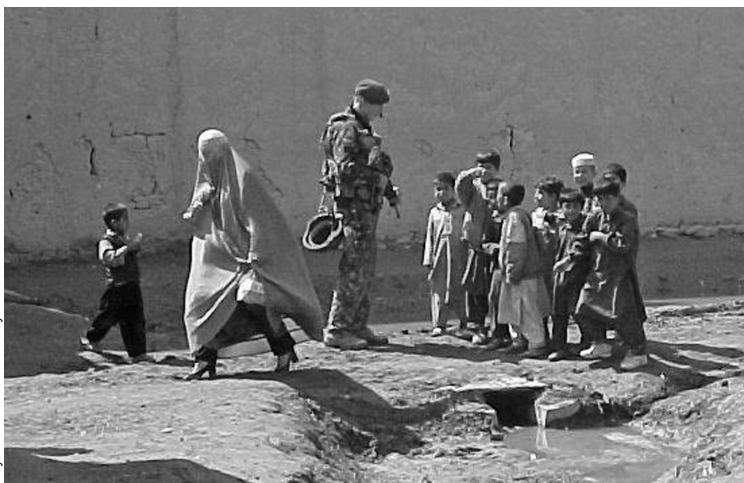
After successfully completing this exercise, the unit is deemed fit for deployment.

Cultural Information

Staff from the Section [of] Cultural Affairs and Information provide all classes on cultural information in peacekeeping training programs. The individual program includes 4 hours of instruction. At the unit level, the program is 3 hours long. This might not seem like much, but it allows time to present the basic information needed to understand local circumstances as well as the basic skills needed to communicate effectively and respectfully with the local populace. The training also allows instructors to do some serious work countering stereotyping and other forms of prejudice.

Hearing soldiers express their strongly felt opinions about the achievements and values of their own culture is not uncommon, but not all of this rhetoric should be labelled as ethnocentric. Often these individuals are unaware that certain characteristics and peculiarities of their Western (Dutch) culture are not widely shared or even acceptable elsewhere. A key aspect of all presentations on culture is to instill an awareness of cultural diversity and a basic understanding of cultural relativism.

Explaining to soldiers why cultural education is part of the mission training program is also important. Some seem to believe that cultural information has little relevance to readiness for deployment. Explaining the usefulness of cultural information



Dutch ISAF soldier and Afghan children in Kabul, 2002.

and emphasizing why it is helpful in establishing friendly relationships with local peoples are vital. Soldiers must understand and accept the practical use of cultural information before they are willing to act on it.

Training Program Topics

Basically, every presentation in a mission training program is composed of a similar list of topics. Instructors first offer a balanced view of the recent conflict, including how the different population groups in the mission area perceive the conflict. They then explain the consequences of the conflict and warn of how the level of postconflict stress and psychological trauma among the people can affect their response to foreign troops. Unemployment, poverty, and material destruction caused by high levels of violence also influence local behavior.

To provide insight into the daily life of the host nation, trainers touch on basic social and geographical facts on population structure, ethnic diversity, life expectancy, economic activities and employment, sources of income, and the overall level of development. While trainers include some historical information, they only use it within the context of the current situation. For example, they might discuss the aftereffects of the communist political and economic system in the former Yugoslavia to explain some of the weaknesses found in Bosnia today. When discussing Afghanistan, trainers might cite the emergence and functioning of the Afghan monarchy to explain the precarious rule of central government.

Dutch military students learn about different forms of social organization, ranging from the extended family to clan and tribal organizations, and they discuss local concepts of honor, shame, and revenge. Lessons cover the importance of religion to local communities, the role of religious leaders, and unfamiliar aspects of local religious festivities. If necessary, trainers explain tenets of the dominant religion in the deployment area.

Differences in style of communication between Dutch culture and local culture are mentioned in full detail, including how to avoid offensive

body language, facial expressions, and gestures. Instructors use many examples from everyday situations to explain the various do's and don'ts found in the mission area. Gender sensitivities require special attention. Again, training is not only about the different social roles of men and women in local society; it also deals with the behavior toward girls and women expected from our soldiers.

All presentations include many photographs, maps, other graphics, and video and TV recordings. We adjust all information to the educational background of the class. For example, commanding officers and their staffs receive a more academic, indepth presentation or followup seminars on specific topics.

The objective of every presentation is the same: instilling a basic understanding of the local situation and presenting the best means available for establishing and maintaining friendly relations with the local population. Our soldiers need to know how to communicate effectively. Showing respect for the host nation's culture, social customs, and religion is vital. Cultural information is a must if we are going to accomplish our mission while protecting our own troops.

Key Challenges

Is it possible to combine the warrior spirit with a basic level of cultural sensitivity, especially when troops in the field face hostile elements? Is it possible to provide useful cultural information without painting a simplified, stereotypical picture of local culture, society, and customs? In our experience,



Dutch ISAF troops of 11 Air Mobile Brigade on patrol with Kabul city police in Kabul, 2002.

these questions highlight the key challenges in cultural training. The answer to both is yes.

For some time, our section remained focused on European or Mediterranean peace-support missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Cyprus. Our army also participated in the U.N. Truce Supervision Organization's monitoring mission in the Middle East and the U.N. mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The latter was a classic case of peacekeeping between two former belligerents. The physical danger of these missions was limited. Recent missions, however, have been more dangerous. Dutch troops participating in the International Security Assistance Force and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, and Stabilization Force Iraq and NATO training missions in Iraq have faced terrorist attacks.

Concern with force protection has affected our cultural-awareness training. Soldiers believed that cultural sensitivity could be quite useful for peace operations in a secure environment, but saw it as irrelevant in combat situations. The warrior spirit came to dominate the troops' behavior toward the local population, especially during a sequence of hostile activities. Preventing deterioration in the relationship between Dutch troops and the local people was not easy.

In general, most soldiers appreciated information on the cultural characteristics of the area to which they were deploying. They saw cultural awareness as a useful additional skill, but in areas like southern Iraq or Afghanistan, especially, where Dutch troops came under attack, force protection

frequently took priority over maintaining friendly relations with the local population. Nevertheless, our soldiers persisted in their efforts to gain trust and win over hearts and minds. However difficult the circumstances, they upheld respect for local culture, religion, and customs. Infantry company and battalion commanding officers remained convinced that it was essential to maintain a good relationship with most of the people of Al Muthanna province, who were committed to a peaceful future for Iraq, or with the people of Baghlan, who are trying to build a new Afghanistan. The commanding officer's role is vital. Commanders must make their views known to ensure that every individual in their unit is aware of the risks of alienating the local people.

We must avoid simplified, stereotypical images of local culture and society. When referring to Afghanistan, trainers explain that although the country has a low level of development, efforts to modernize society took place throughout the 20th century and continue today to build a stronger base for future development. While emphasizing the strength of traditional Islam in the countryside, trainers stress that political Islamism is not accepted in all rural areas. Soldiers learn that a strong adherence to the honor code of Pashtunwali does not automatically mean that every conflict among Pashtuns ends in revenge killing on a massive scale; the code also offers opportunities for negotiated settlement of disputes. The social position of women in Afghanistan might still be weak, but opportunities for them are increasing and many Afghans are accepting such improvements. In short, we tell our soldiers that culture is never one-dimensional, black or white, or unchangeable. As much as possible, the instructors seek to prevent soldiers from forming simplistic stereotypes about host-nation culture.

Valuable Tools

No matter how good the information and the method of instruction are in cultural training, acceptance remains a key issue. Cultural information must be demand-driven, practical, and useful from an operational point of view. Soldiers must see that awareness of cultural difference and basic respect for host-nation culture are crucial to force security and/or mission success.

Cultural awareness is not the answer to all of the problems of postconflict operations, however. It

will not end terrorist attacks, instability, or criminal activities in the mission area or create a safe, secure environment. But, it can help in establishing the best possible relationship with the largest number of local

people who want to get on with their lives and who are willing to accept the temporary presence of a foreign army. Without such a relationship, it will be difficult to build a better world. **MR**

NOTES

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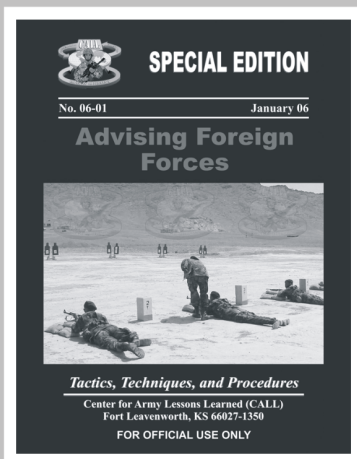
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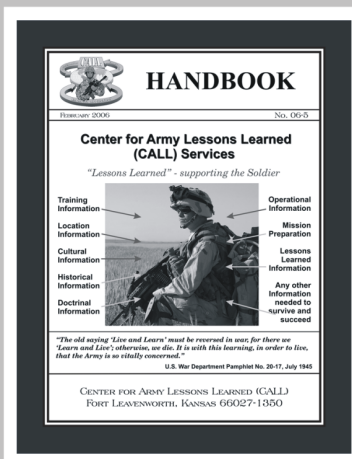
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